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ABSTRACT

Suggestions for faculty who are attempting to improve their advising skills without the benefit of a formal program are offered. Good advisement is always a process composed of timely responses in areas relevant to student education. The scope of advising may encompass the following: describe the intent of the general or liberal arts part of the undergraduate curriculum for the advisee; communicate the rationale for institutional and/or departmental requirements, policies, and procedures encountered in the advising process (i.e., grading policies, endorsement of schedules); analyze the student's study skills/habits, especially when difficulties with a course are indicated; question the course selections and other choices of students (e.g., determine the reasons why certain courses are chosen); determine the involvement of advisees in other campus activities; explore the advisee's career choice and suggest alternative careers if appropriate; explore graduate school expectations and choices with the student; and assist students with course selection. Strategies that advisors can use to allow sufficient coverage of all areas of advising are as follows: develop a checklist, calendar, or syllabus for advising; use contracts with advisees (i.e., a student outlines a degree plan); use groups when appropriate to economize advising time; use other students as advisor helpers; encourage student self-advisement; and share information, skills, and techniques with other advisors. There are also a multitude of techniques that may help an advisor work more effectively with advisees. These are grouped under three skill headings: informing, communicating, and helping. Among the suggestions are to insure having accurate information about academic programs, listen carefully and use open-ended questions, and respect the advisee. (SW)

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Improving Academic Advising

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INTRODUCTION

Few people in higher education, especially students, would argue that academic advising has been one of higher education's top priorities. In some ways this is surprising because the majority of higher education's efforts are concentrated on undergraduate programs enrolling students who lack experience with the complexities of academia. Although it has not enjoyed a top-priority status, academic advising has been and continues to be the primary means of helping students benefit from an array of programs offered on most college and university campuses. The literature suggests that good advising programs result in better student attitudes, self-concept, and intellectual and interpersonal development. Increases in academic performance, FTE's, and retention also result (Glennen, 1976; Hadley, 1976; Noel, 1976). Obviously, good advising benefits institutions as well as students.

Even though some institutions have begun programs to train their faculty in advising, institutional recognition of the faculty's need for specialized training on advising skills and techniques is not characteristic of higher education today. This paper provides direction for faculty who are attempting to improve their advising skills without the benefit of a formal program. Suggestions in this paper are based on the premise that they are 1) possible, 2) inexpensive, 3) effective, and 4) time efficient.

THE SCOPE OF ADVISING

Advising is sometimes attending to simple questions; other times, it is anticipating an advisee's need to know about more complex matters. But good advisement is always a process composed of timely responses in areas relevant to student education. It must be developmental, progressively tailoring its responses to fit the situation of the advisee.

General Relevance of Education -- Describe the intent of the general or "liberal arts" component of the undergraduate curriculum for the advisee. How many times have you done this in the past year? Too often students (and advisors) choose general coursework merely to fill boxes on a sheet of requirements without any understanding of how general education contributes to a broader framework from which the students can make informed decisions and develop problem-solving abilities, useful in a constantly changing society. Students can be helped to understand the purpose and value of general education while they are experiencing it, rather than postponing this awareness until many years after undergraduate school.

Rationale for Requirements -- Communicate the rationale for institutional and/or departmental requirements, policies, and procedures encountered in the advising process, i.e., grading policies, endorsement of schedules, etc. This assumes advisor knowledge of such rationales and could necessitate inquiries in order to gain the necessary information. Advising is much easier when both parties understand the "ground rules" under which they must operate; furthermore, nothing serves to undermine an advising program or the likelihood of student success, more than advisors with insufficient knowledge who merely agree with student complaints. Advisors may disagree with the conditions imposed and should work constructively for change of outdated, irrelevant or dysfunctional constraints on the advising system.

Study Skills -- Analyze the student's study skills/habits, especially when difficulties with courses are indicated. Review the student's notebook or textbook to determine the appropriateness or adequacy of note taking, reading, and organizational skills. The advisor might suggest study techniques he/she used to survive academically.

Question Student Course Decisions -- Question the course selections and other choices of students, e.g., determine the reasons why certain courses are chosen, especially over others. Is the course or instructor reputation, difficulty level, time of day, or familiarity with content a factor in the selection? Should it be? Should alternative selections be considered to develop a secondary

area of expertise, e.g., in a language or culture, in writing or analytical skills, or in technical or organizational abilities? Effective advising requires more than "rubber stamping" student course decisions which are not in violation with some regulation.

Extra Curricular Institutional Involvement - - Determine the involvement of advisees in other campus activities. Astin (1977) cites involvement as a strong influence on student's satisfaction with the college experience and environment. Advisors can suggest campus involvements that enhance a student's curriculum, provide opportunities to test one's skills, or serve as recreation. These could include campus clubs and organizations, athletics, campus newspapers and literary magazines, college committees, and even student employment.

Career Choices - - Explore the advisee's career choice and suggest alternative careers if appropriate. Advisors often advise students in their respective majors/departments, and many of these students have chosen the major with too specific a job in mind. Obviously, not all students will be able to fulfill their expectations. Alternatives need to be introduced and examined.

Graduate School - - Explore graduate school expectations and choices with the student. As students progress toward the end of their undergraduate careers, some will certainly aspire to attend graduate school. Capable students should be encouraged to do so. The advisor is a valuable student resource to assist with surveying appropriate institutions, assembling documentation for admission, and making proper selections. Other students may desire graduate instruction, but have not accumulated the academic credentials necessary for admission. Advisors must also be prepared to present this reality and to assist in developing alternative future plans for such students.

Course Selection - - Assist students with course selection. This task is purposely placed last on this list of advising activities. In most advising settings, the course-scheduling function should be minimized for advisors. Students are or should become able to read and understand the course and graduation requirements. The course scheduling role should be brief and simple. Except for questioning students about their choices, scheduling should occupy no more than 25 percent of one's advising time. The advisor can then be more interactive, thus more effective.

ADVISING STRATEGIES

The components of the academic advising process are both important and time consuming. There are, however, several strategies that advisors can use to conserve time and, thus, allow sufficient coverage of all areas of advising.

Scheduling Aids - - Develop a checklist, calendar or syllabus for advising. A schematic representation of advising responsibilities helps the conscientious advisor know when peak advising (course-scheduling) periods will occur, i.e., Pre-registration, Registration, and Drop-Add. What is more important, less busy times are identified so that other advising tasks can be accomplished. Advising is, in fact, an ongoing process; it does not start and stop on specific dates. Similar schedules can be given to advisees to make them aware of the advisor's availability and of opportunities to schedule their own advising appointments.

Contracts - - Most faculty are familiar with contractual learning in the classroom. Use contracts; its application to advising is direct. Some examples include a student outlining a degree plan; having the undecided student complete an interest inventory, seek-out materials about careers, or "interview" a practitioner in a career he/she is contemplating. Another contract could have the failing student obtain tutorial assistance or have the uninvolved student participate in an activity. Students complete their contracts in preparation for the next advising session. When advisees are prepared, advisor time is better used. (See Kramer & Gardner, 1977, for a further discussion of advising contracts.)

Groups - - This seemingly obvious technique for economizing advising time receives surprisingly little use. Faculty do not teach their students on a one-to-one basis, and advising should not always require such individuality either. Advise students in groups. As in the classroom, group advising avoids the repetition of common information, illustrates the similarity of student concerns, facilitates the investigation of specific facts, rumors, myths, and misinterpretations, and stimulates the exploration of a variety of course selections and career options.

This technique need not be limited to students. Small groups of advisors can meet together with some of their students to compliment each other in sharing information, suggestions, skills, and interpretations.

Peer Advising - - Use other students as advisor helpers. Since students seek advice from other students, the faculty advisor can capitalize on peer relationships to provide basic advising. Many institutions have developed successful peer advising programs, both volunteer and paid, in which highly-trained, upperclass students fulfill the scheduling function quite well. Where these programs do not exist, faculty advisors can develop their own by simply asking one of their advisees to serve as an advisor helper. With some direction these students can assist other students in their course selections, completion of forms, and other

routine preparations. This technique also serves as an involvement opportunity for selected students.

Self Advisement - - Encourage student self-advisement. Students should progress to a level of complete accuracy in making course selections necessary to fulfill graduation requirements. Obviously, new students will need to learn this skill and will require more assistance in the beginning; but they should gradually be required to assume this portion of the advising role. This strategy not only saves advisor time, but also encourages student responsibility in the advising and decision-making processes.

Sharing - - Share information, skills, and techniques with other advisors. Many advisors have special techniques or approaches they have found effective with their students. These should be shared so that advisors can help each other become more effective in their roles. Advisors might also collectively request from appropriate sources clear, accurate, and timely information about their advisees, about institutional policies and procedures (which often change), and about characteristics of the general population, career opportunities, and placement data. Computer-generated demographic and academic information, advising handbooks, college catalogs, schedules of classes, and circulating memos all contribute to a better informed advisor and a better advising program. If these materials are not currently available, advisors should stimulate their development.

ADVISING SKILLS

In addition to the areas included in the scope and strategies of advising, there is a multitude of techniques which possibly will help an advisor work more effectively with his/her advisees. The following are intended merely to be suggestive, not exhaustive. They are grouped under three skill headings: informing, communicating, and helping.

Informing - - If academic advising does nothing else, it at least should provide information which helps students make the decisions needed to pursue their college careers successfully.

Be sure you have accurate information about the academic program(s) you are responsible for as an advisor. Recheck basic information for changes and be certain you know what you are responsible for.

Obtain a list of reference people for advisees who want more detailed information about a program.

As a freshman advisor, you often need to know to whom you can refer advisees with questions about student affairs programs, e.g., financial aid, housing, etc.

Communicating - - Effective communication skills are essential for advisors. Providing the above information in a meaningful way serves as a basis for decisions which can have a profound influence on a student's entire life. Advisees are not simply deciding what courses they will take or what they will major in, they are also deciding, if only indirectly, their futures.

Listen carefully. Check your understanding by paraphrasing what the advisee has said or by asking a question. Also ask yourself, if the advisee has asked the right questions. Too often, the correct answer is given by the advisor -- but but the wrong question was asked by the student, and communication fails.

Use open-ended questions and similar techniques that enable you to discuss topics with the advisee rather than allowing only yes or no responses.

Discuss with your advisees their backgrounds and experiences, progress on their goals, and future plans. It will provide you helpful information, and it will reflect your concern for the advisees as individuals.

Most communications have both an intellectual and an emotional component. Listen for the emotional message. If it seems to be out of proportion or inconsistent with the intellectual part of the message, you may need to examine this discrepancy before a rational decision can be made.

If you are working with more than a few advisees, keep notes about what decisions have been made and why. A quick review before seeing the student again will help you recall certain details, which also demonstrates your interest in students as individuals.

Helping - - Because some of the outcomes of advising can have important implications for the advisee's life, the more effective approaches to academic advising go beyond informing and begin to involve some counseling skills.

If you honestly consider advising to be a waste of time, do everything you can to be relieved of the assignment because that attitude is almost guaranteed to prohibit the development of any worthwhile interaction.

Respect your advisees as people and show them that you respect them. One way to do this is to make a sincere effort to do a really effective job of your advising.

Help your advisees make the decisions. You should not make them; they are or should be adults; and more importantly, they must live with the decisions.

Respecting an advisee does not mean that you must agree with all of their decisions. Your role is to help them make realistic decisions. This means that if you have reason to believe that they will fail or are making a poor choice, you should honestly discuss this with them.

Focus on an advisee's strengths, as well as weaknesses. To do so is encouraging and helpful.

Know enough to recognize when one of your advisees needs counseling help beyond your capability, and know how to make a referral.

Be available, you cannot provide even the basics to an advisee if the advisee cannot find you.

CONCLUSION

This paper has offered a variety of suggestions and alternatives for extending the academic advising process in higher education beyond what too easily remains the status quo--course scheduling. It does not address the critical issues of selection processes, comprehensive training programs, evaluation schemes, or reward structures for advisors. The reader is referred to Grites (1979) and Crockett (1978) for analysis of these issues and numerous examples of materials used to resolve them.

Adapting the concepts and skills described above allows a developmental, rather then prescriptive, role for the academic advisor. It is much easier for both the faculty advisor and the advisee to expect and permit the advising relationship to be merely a signatory function. The advisor, therefore, must make a conscious effort to become more intrusive in this relationship. When accomplished, the results can be impressive (see Glennen, 1976). In fact, this effort might well be the significant factor in the student's academic success or failure, satisfaction or discontent, and retention or attrition. Exerting a positive influence on students is the most significant outcome of improved academic advising.

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